FAMOUS AMERICAN DUELS

THE CILLEY-GRAVES DUEL

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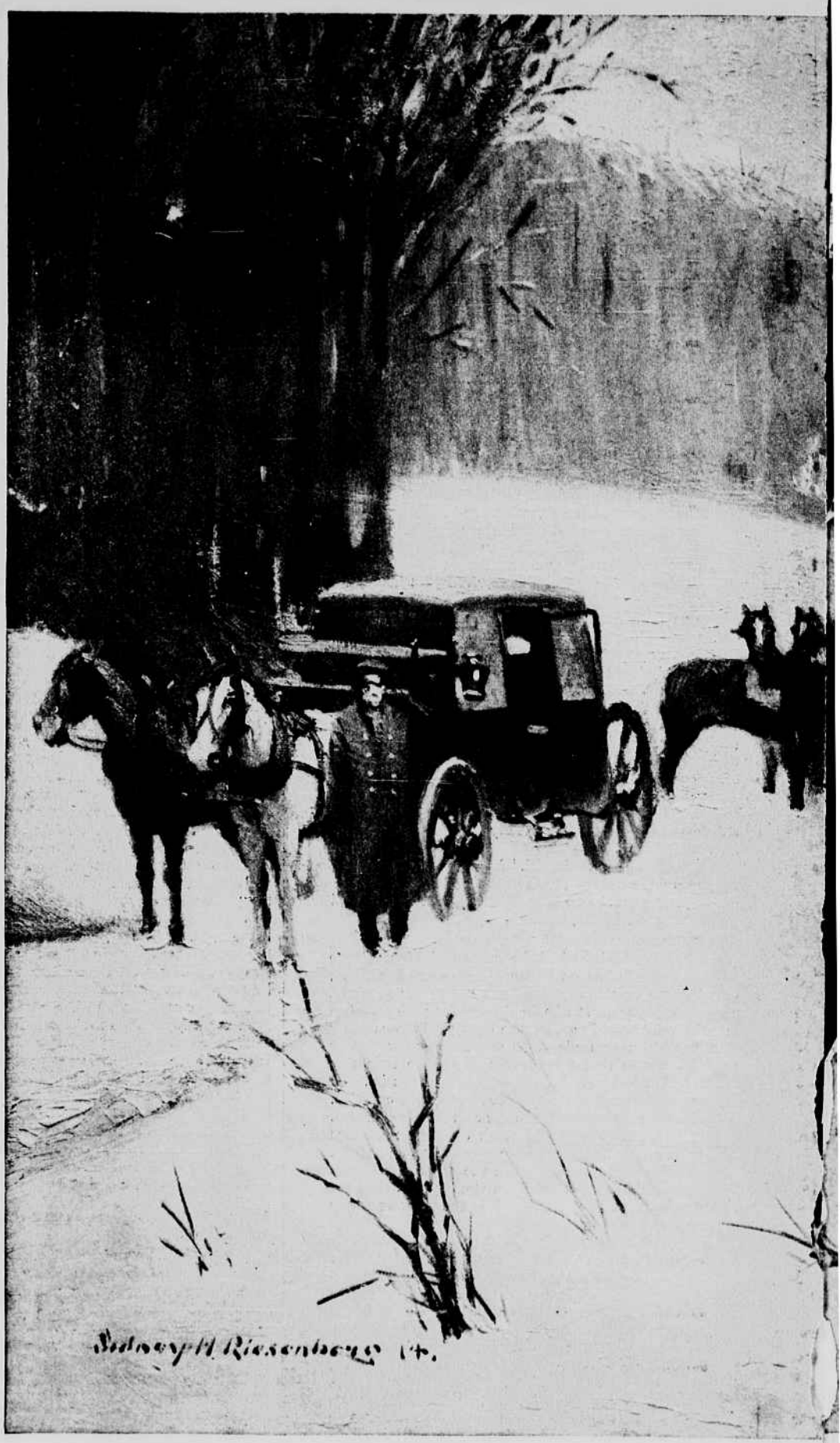

THIS was preëminently a congressional duel, of which there have been several. The original cause of the duel was a speech delivered on the floor of the House of Representatives. Both of the principals were Congressmen, and their seconds were even more distinguished members of the House. Moreover, the funeral of the victim took place in the National Capitol, and the President of the United States followed the body to the grave in a procession that included most of the high officials of the nation. These facts naturally made the event unusually prominent as a factor in the abolition of the dueling code.

Interest centers chiefly upon Jonathan Cilley, the young and brilliant "gentleman from Maine." He was a New Hampshire man by birth, and an orator of no mean ability; but for the duel he might have become a figure of great national importance. Up to the day of the fight he had been regarded as a young fellow of unlimited potentiality. He had made a fine record at Bowdoin College, Maine, where he was graduated in 1825, and he shortly afterward linked his fortunes with the State of Maine by marrying a girl on that side of the border.

In 1832, when he was only twenty-eight, Cilley was elected to the Maine Legislature, and eventually became Speaker of the lower house. When he had reached the age of thirty-four he was a member of Congress from Maine, elected in a district where his political opponents had a handsome majority. The voters believed so strongly in the man that they ignored his politics and sent him to Washington as their representative. Young Cilley seemed to have the world by the tail; but the "code of honor" ended all within a year, and at the same time wrote "finis" upon the political career of another Congressman of promise. Had Cilley lived, his name would undoubtedly have been in the school histories; but there are in the histories few names of men who died at thirty-five.

A Washington correspondent started the trouble. The Courier and Enquirer of New York had a man at court who wrote under the pen name of "The Spy in Washington." One day this man published an article in which he said he could prove "that there is at least one member of Congress who has offered to barter his services and his influence with a department or departments for compensation."

This remark obviously placed every member of the House of Representatives under suspicion; therefore one of the members rose in the House, read the article, and called for an official investigation. Immediately thereupon the gentleman from Maine (Cilley) objected, on the ground that it was beneath the dignity of the House to pay attention to a mere newspaper attack.

Up rose Henry A. Wise of Virginia in support of the proposed investigation. In the course of his remarks he insinuated that Cilley had objected because he was afraid the investigators would catch him with the goods.

Cilley got out of his seat with alacrity, and hot language was in his mouth. With much effort he kept it inside and told the gentleman from Virginia that the charge was "a base insinuation." Wise came back at him in resentment, and Cilley repeated that Wise had made an insinuation and that it was most damnably base. The upshot of the whole matter was that the investigation was ordered. The newspaper correspondent was summoned before the bar of the House, and there he publicly exonerated every member of the lower House—incidentally suggesting that it was a Senator who was in the market.

In the course of events Cilley of Maine had made a speech in which he referred in an uncomplimentary way to an alleged blackmail transaction whereby Colonel James Watson Webb, editor of the Courier and Enquirer, had added largely to his bank account at the expense of the United States Bank. It was Cilley's argument that the House was lowering its dignity whenever it paid attention to the barking of a cur of that breed; though he carefully refrained from canine figures of speech.

This speech was the direct cause of the duel. Note, if you please, that the name of William J. Graves of Kentucky has not hitherto been mentioned. Yet Graves was one of the men who fought the duel.

What Cilley had suggested about Editor Webb, whether true or false, caused that fire eater to hurry down to Washington and send Cilley a note, asking if he had been referring to him when he made the speech. Here is where Graves came in: it was the Kentuckian who played the role of messenger boy and carried the note.

Cilley was foxy when the note was handed to him. He asked what it was all about. Graves told him. Then Cilley handed the letter back unopened and said that he would not allow himself to be drawn into a newspaper controversy over a matter referred to in public debate. He talked the thing over frankly with his brother Congressman, tacitly recognizing that he was being challenged to a duel and that he was declining the honor. Graves went away satisfied and made his report to Colonel Webb.

Later on the same day Graves sent Cilley a letter, asking him to say in black and white that his virtual refusal to give satisfaction to the editor was not based upon any objection to Colonel Webb as a gentleman—for any gentleman could decline to meet another if he could establish the fact that the other was not a real gentleman.

Cilley answered that he neither affirmed nor denied anything with regard to the character of the editor of the Courier and Enquirer. "I stated to you, and now repeat, that I intended by the refusal no disrespect to you."

This frank refusal of Cilley to put his O. K. upon the character of Webb made Graves think that he was "in bad" with the editor. He had reported that everything had been fixed up, and now his veracity as a Kentucky gentleman was considered by him to be involved. It was no longer a question between Cilley and Webb, but one between Cilley and Graves.